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RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 2352
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SENSITIVE

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [EAID](#) [SOCI](#) [KHIV](#) [TX](#)

SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: COMMERCIAL SEX WORKERS SHOW SIGNIFICANT
LACK OF KNOWLEDGE ABOUT HIV/AIDS

[11](#). (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

[12](#). (SBU) SUMMARY: An unpublished report on "Knowledge, Attitude, and Practice Survey on HIV/AIDS and Drug Use Among Sex Workers in Turkmenistan" prepared in 2007 by the UN Development Program (UNDP) with the support of the Ministry of Health and Medical Industry (MOHMI) uncovered a glaring lack of knowledge about HIV/AIDS among commercial sex workers in Turkmenistan. Approximately 61% of respondents were aware of HIV transmission via sexual intercourse but less than half knew that it could be transmitted through blood or shared syringes. Almost three quarters of respondents acknowledged using recreational drugs, and slightly over one-third of total respondents believed that recreational drugs provide protection from HIV and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Less than 40% reported using condoms regularly, although another 47% said condoms were used "sometimes". Collectively, these findings highlight the considerable risk that Turkmenistan already faces HIV/AIDS rates similar to its Central Asian neighbors, even as it continues to deny the problem. END SUMMARY

HEADS IN THE SAND - FOR NOW?

[13](#). (SBU) Turkmenistan has reported officially only two HIV-positive cases since 1993. These two patients died in 1993 and 1996. Due to unwillingness at the highest levels of government to directly confront the issue, the real rate of HIV/AIDS cases remains unknown.

Signs are emerging, however, that the government may slowly be willing to confront what may be a significant problem. At a UNODC-organized conference in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, November 29-30, 2007, Turkmenistan's representatives announced that the country's officially registered number of drug users was 33,361, of which 9,112 are intravenous drug users (IDUs). One potential estimate of the scale of the HIV positive population is 10% of the acknowledged IDUs.

[14](#). (SBU) Turkmenistan's National HIV/AIDS/STIs Prevention program for 2005-2010 broadly corresponds to international standards, but is aimed at prevention only. In 2006, Turkmenistan applied to the Global Fund to Fight TB, HIV/AIDS and Malaria for a grant to support

its prevention programs, but the application was rated "Category 3 -- Not recommended for approval in its present form but encouraged to resubmit following major revision." In 2008, Turkmenistan decided not to apply for a Global Fund grant on HIV/AIDS because the government remained reluctant to announce the actual number of HIV/AIDS cases.

SURVEY A STEP IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION - BUT NOT ENOUGH

15. (SBU) Beginning in summer 2007, UNDP undertook a "Knowledge, Attitude, and Practice Survey on HIV/AIDS and Drug Use Among Sex Workers in Turkmenistan" with the support of the MOHMI. This is one of the few surveys that has been undertaken in Turkmenistan to assess the HIV/AIDS situation. The survey was based on individual interviews with a representative sample of 238 sex workers from different provinces of Turkmenistan. The report's release, however, was not approved by the Turkmen government, so the findings are not considered official and are not publicly acknowledged by health officials. USAID recently obtained a copy of the report, however, and its major findings are detailed below.

LOW BASIC KNOWLEDGE OF TRANSMISSION...

16. (SBU) One of the main findings of the report is that commercial sex workers, one of the principal high-risk groups for HIV/AIDS infection in Turkmenistan, are not adequately informed about methods of HIV/AIDS transmission.

Approximately 61% of respondents were aware of HIV transmission via sexual intercourse but less than half knew that it could be transmitted through blood or shared syringes. About one-fourth of respondents (27.73%) thought that HIV can be transmitted during breast-feeding. One-fifth thought that use of common toilet seats and 13.45% thought that insect bites lead to HIV transmission. Less

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than 30% knew that HIV can be transmitted by all types of sexual intercourse. Almost 60% considered that HIV is transmitted only through vaginal sexual intercourse.

...LEADS TO DANGEROUS PRACTICES

17. (SBU) Since a high percentage of respondents were also drug users, several questions addressed their behavior and knowledge in this area. Almost three-quarters of those surveyed consume drugs, and 56.72% of the total surveyed injects drugs intravenously. Almost one-fifth of respondents believed that injecting 10 ml of water intravenously was an appropriate response to a drug overdose. Slightly over one-third of total respondents believed that recreational drugs provide protection from HIV and sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

18. (SBU) Additionally, less than 40% reported using condoms regularly, although another 47% said they "sometimes" used condoms. The most common reason for not using condoms was that clients were against condom use. The survey stated that "there is a need for full-fledged communication campaign on HIV/AIDS prevention among the target audience and also among the population in general. Sex-workers' clients are part of population, and it is necessary to increase their awareness and motivation to use means of protection for sex workers and clients and the community in general."

EXPERTS AGREE ON PROBLEM, NEED FOR MORE OPENNESS

19. (SBU) In the course of the survey, six in-depth interviews were carried out with experts from official entities and international donors. The scope of the situation on HIV/AIDS, STIs, and drug-use prevalence is unknown, but estimated as "significant." Almost all agreed that, consistent with the survey's results, sex-workers in Turkmenistan have low awareness about and motivation for safe-sex practices, as well as high levels of drug abuse.

110. (SBU) Some disagreement appeared over the level of detection and registration procedures. While some experts asserted that testing was conducted in accordance with international standards countrywide, others believed that only testing at the Center for HIV/AIDS Prevention in Ashgabat was adequate. Regarding

registration, some experts stated that official statistics related to HIV-positive cases are concealed by the state, but others said that patients were able to access their status as a result of testing. However, all parties agreed that AIDS patients do not receive necessary support and infect an unknown number of partners due to the unwillingness to officially acknowledge and treat AIDS cases.

INTENSIVE COMMUNICATION AND EDUCATION PROGRAM NECESSARY

¶11. (SBU) The survey demonstrated an insufficient awareness level about HIV/AIDS prevention and transmission. Since the survey also identified health workers as the most trusted source of information and preferred channel to receive information among respondents, it recommended post-graduate training for health workers with an intensive communication component aimed at improving their counseling skills. Health workers should learn not only medical problems but also understand how to motivate sex workers to change their behavior. Additionally, one-fourth of respondents listed "other girls" as preferred source of information, highlighting the potential importance of peer education programs.

¶12. (SBU) COMMENT: The current HIV/AIDS awareness level among sex workers is insufficient. Due to a lack of knowledge and failure to undertake preventive measures and because of dangerous behavior, including lack of condoms and intravenous drug use, a clear basis for HIV/AIDS and STIs infections to be transmitted to a broader segment of the population already exists. Although all the interviewed experts were optimistic about changes towards a more open society that tackles hard questions that relate to prevention, detection, and registration of HIV-positive individuals, any

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positive changes must be accelerated to stop the HIV/AIDS situation in Turkmenistan from worsening. END COMMENT.

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